No 21

NO 4

On Amenorrhea

by Minor of Pa.

passed Mar. 20 1817

A

Dissertation

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It is more in compliance with an established law of this University, than from a desire to expose this rude sketch to the scrutinizing eye of the learned medical faculty, that I am induced to write a dissertation. Should I however in the course of this essay be able to add to that portion of evidence in favour of the superior virtues of an article of the Materia Medica in the cure of a disease, ample reward will be obtained for the attention paid to, and the small portion of labour bestowed upon the subject.

But gratifying indeed would it be, were I able, and at the same time to do justice to my own feelings, to present these few lines for your inspection without offering an apology, but the numerous engagements at this late hour of the session force it upon me. I shall notwithstanding endeavour to render it interesting, as it is my intention to reject altogether conjectural hypothesis as well as analogical reasoning, and substitute in their stead the firmer basis of experimental observation.

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which at different times have seized upon the human machine, we are readily met by one of a formidable aspect, and which in every age has been admitted to be of very difficult management; it is Amenorrhœa. This disease has been noticed by the ablest physicians which our country has afforded, and I think we may venture to affirm, that not one, after the most ardent researches and repeated experiments, has found himself possessed of the means which he might at all times rely upon in curing this disease.

It has been admitted on all hands, that no class of medicines which compose the Materia Medica is more important, and at the same time so deficient as that termed Emmenagogues, and on this account a great deal of labour has been bestowed in experimenting on various articles.

This industry we are persuaded, has not been exerted in vain, but a fruitful harvest of practical information has been the rich reward.

We are highly gratified in stating, that these experiments have added to the class of Emmenagogues an invaluable medicine, which cannot fail in a large majority of cases to relieve this distressing disease. The medicine to which

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I allude is the Polygala Seneka or the rattle snake root.

Though my object in this narrative is to attest the virtues of the Seneka, still it is almost impossible to introduce its history and management without previously noticing the disease to which it is adapted, and also to give a short detail of the most common practice which has been pursued.

By Amenorrhœa we understand a total absence of the menses, or of that fluid which is secreted by the uterus periodically, and commencing at the age of puberty. This disease is divided by authors into two stages, the first the retention or emansio mensium, and secondly the suppression.

By retention of the menses is meant their not appearing at that period of life which is most common, being interrupted by some cause and then considered as a disease.

By suppression we infer the interruption of the action after being regularly established. In some cases the absence of the menses depends upon a malformation of the organs of generation, a deficiency of the Ovaria, or an imperfect developement of the uterus, but this is foreign from our purpose, as that alone which depends upon a removable cause

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In by far the greater number of instances, the action of the uterus is postponed solely from a general debility of the system, from a want of due vigour by which the new action of menstruation is prevented from being formed. The retention of the menses may in general be known by certain disorders arising in other parts of the body about the time when the menses should have appeared, and being such, as when arising at this period have been known from experience to be removed by the flowing of the menses

These symptoms are so accurately described by Doct: Cullen and Mr. Burns of Glascow, that I do not hesitate in borrowing their words. They are sluggishness and frequent sense of weariness and debility, a dislike to active employment, a pale or sallow complexion, oedematous swellings of the feet and legs, various symptoms of indigestion, costiveness, loathing of food but craving for indigestible substances as lime chalk &c, and sometimes the whole body becomes pale and flaccid. The breathing is hurried by any quick or laborious motion; the heart is liable to palpitations, and pains in the head back and loins

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also attend. When these symptoms occur in a great degree they constitute the disease called Chlorosis, which some authors suppose scarcely ever to exist distinct from the retention.

The preternatural appetite which has been mentioned, is stated by some authors to exist at times in a very high degree, and as belonging more particularly to the Emansio mensium.

Some of the preceding symptoms occur more or less in every case of retention, and in several cases which I have seen they have been well marked, though I have never been able to witness a case in which the symptoms were so violent as to constitute the Chlorosis — The symptoms which particularly characterised the several cases which I saw, and which were the milder forms of the disease, were debility, disinclination to motion, headache, pale countenance and diminished arterial action.

It will now readily appear from what has been stated, that a case of retention will very readily be detected, and that the several symptoms which attend, seem to point out the mode of proceeding in effecting a cure. Such I am induced to believe is the fact, and in the first place let us direct our attention to the general constitution, and secondly to exciting the action of the uterine arteries.

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These indications may in general be readily fulfilled, by the remedies which are laid down in every author on the subject; they are daily exercise, but never carried so far as to fatigue the patient, the various tonic medicines, as pure bitters, bark, the various preparations of iron, principally the Carb: Ferri, and a generous diet together with the moderate use of wine. The stomach should be previously cleansed by a gentle emetic, which will tend to give a greater effect to the tonic medicines; we should administer also a gentle bath; and throughout the whole course of the disease attention should be paid to the state of the bowels, as costiveness is apt to arise and prove troublesome. I have generally seen the bark and iron administered in conjunction, made into an electuary and believe it a valuable remedy. These means by restoring the general health will in some cases effect a cure, but when they do not we should resort to such medicines as are calculated to fulfil the second indication, that of acting more directly on the uterus and thereby promoting the menstrual flux —

To effect this last purpose a vast variety of medicines have been used, but I have never seen the preparation of Aloes and Sulph: Ferri fail after the health had

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been improved by the means already pointed out; the formula is the following— Rp: Alo: Socotorinæ grx ii } Make
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Two of these pills should be taken every other night, and assisted by warm pediluvia and fomentations when nature seems to be making an effort. By this plan of treatment no difficulty will in general be experienced in the cure of the retention of the menses.

In some cases a plethoric state of the system accompanies the retention of the menses, and here bloodletting and regular purging should be the practice, marking at the same time their effect on the system.

Various other remedies have been employed, as scammony, gamboge, and a strong infusion of Senna which stimulates the rectum very considerably, has been mentioned as constituting a useful remedy in this disease. Some not possessing a purgative quality have been spoken of, and highly recommended, as the savin in powder or tincture, tincture of Myrrh, the radix Senecka, and the ergot of rye.

Many local applications have also been recorded, as blisters on the os sacrum or inside of the thighs as near the groin

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as practicable, warmth to the pudenda by cloths wrung out of hot water, and electricity frequently passed through the region of the uterus and lumbar region generally.

The exercises of dancing, jumping the rope, and riding on horseback have in their turn been used, and should we not be able to obtain the wished for end by one or several of the means which have been laid down, then the whole list may be successively tried.

I now proceed to the second division of my subject, (the suppression,) which is by far more difficult of management, and more serious in its effects upon the constitution. We might readily ask, what train of diseases has not the suppression brought upon the constitution at various times. We are told by the highest authority, that the mania of females not unfrequently depends on this suppression, as several cases have been cured by its restoration. We are also instructed, that on visiting a woman with any chronic affection our first enquiry should be, whether the function of the uterus be disordered or not. The ascertaining of this is of no small importance in our proceeding to the treatment, for in some cases it is the cause and in others the effect of the disease.

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From the few preceding remarks, it must at once strike the mind with a conviction of its claims to the most serious attention of the medical faculty. The great importance of cultivating an intimate acquaintance with the disease under consideration, has been impressed by Physicians of the highest standing, nor has medical science been slow in offering many elucidations in relation to it.

On entering upon the study of medicine with practitioners of eminence in Virginia, I often remarked their observations on the difficulty they frequently met with in this distressing complaint. This was sufficient to engage my attention, and I resolved that not one observation should escape me, when I should have the pleasure of attending the lectures delivered in this University — This was not long withheld and I heard from the chair of materia medica, an impressive belief in the virtues of an article which bids fair to be an invaluable remedy, and I accordingly determined to give it a trial the first opportunity that should present.

When from other causes than conception the menstrual flux is interrupted after being regularly established, we

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do not hesitate to consider it a case of suppression.

The most common cause of idiopathic suppression is Cold, which may be assisted by fear anxiety of mind &c. It may also arise as symptomatic of other diseases, particularly those which tend greatly to weaken the patient, and of general debility of the system. Here the effect is often mistaken for the cause, the bad health of the patient being attributed to the suppression of the menses. This should be attended to, and may be easily understood by strictly enquiring into the nature of the case. This disease may be also occasioned by such causes as operate more directly in weakening the action of the uterus, as excessive venery, frequent abortions &c.

When the suppression has continued for some time, and more particularly I believe when induced by cold, preternatural and forcible determinations of blood take place in various parts of the system and give rise to hæmorrhagies which frequently observe periodical returns; these hæmorrhagies take place from the nose lungs stomach &c.

Vicarious hæmorrhagies take place also from other parts of the body, as the hæmorrhoidal vessels, fingers,

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and from warts and the surfaces of ulcers. Many other symptoms are induced, as the hysteric and dyspeptic, frequent cholic pains, a bound belly, costiveness &c. These several symptoms are more or less distressing according as the suppression has been of long or short duration. Not unfrequently the greatest debility will attend accompanied with head ache, pain in the lower part of the abdomen, slow fever and a most distressing pain and distention in the ends of the fingers.

It should be recollected that the suppression of the menses may take place in different states of the system; it may attend a debilitated condition, or exist along with a plethoric and febrile state. These are important objects to be known, as they will influence us much in the curative plan.

In the first, or that attended with debility, a strict attention should be paid to the general health of the patient, and here we are to proceed much in the same way as is laid down in the cure of the retention, administering along with the tonic plan the various Emmenagogues which have been mentioned. In the second, or when plethora exists accompanied with much fever, flushing of the face, and pains in the chest and abdomen, we should use purgatives liberally and detract blood according to the urgency

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of the symptoms. When by these means the febrile symptoms are removed, we may expect advantage from the administration of Emmenagogues –

When the menstrual discharge has been suddenly suppressed in consequence of Cold, there is in general no difficulty in restoring it by the use of the proper remedies; but cases not unfrequently occur when these remedies fail, and the case being somewhat protracted, we find too often the most active remedies unavailing. What we are chiefly to have in view, is the removing that morbid constriction (if you allow me the expression) which effects the uterine arteries, and to excite them to the due performance of their secreting office.

To effect this grand object, upon which depends the curing of the disease, we have recourse to the relaxants, as the warm bath, warm semicupium, bladders filled with hot water and applied to the lower part of the abdomen or inner sides of the thighs, and sitting over a tub of warm decoction of herbs, avoiding strictly any of the exciting causes during the use of these remedies – The whole list of Emmenagogues which have been pointed out should be tried to effect this purpose, and I will swell the list by adding a few more.

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When atony of the uterus accompanies the suppression of the menses, we are informed that some success has attended the administration of the Vinct: of Cantharides, commencing with ten drops morning noon and night, and gradually increasing the dose till it amounts to ℥ij or ℥iij in the twenty four hours. The most obvious effects of this medicine were observed to be an increase in the force of the pulse and a copious flow of urine.

Phosphorus has also been spoken of as likely to prove serviceable, when there exists general torpor of the system accompanied with a low degree of temperament. From the power of this medicine it should be used with the greatest caution, as the introducer of it very justly remarks

Before proceeding to the detail of the superior virtues of the Polygala Seneka over every other medicine enlisted in the class of Emmenagogues, I will offer a few pathological remarks which have been pointed out by distinguished authority, and entitled to our greatest respect. It has been said, and I think with the greatest plausibility, that our ill success in the treatment of Amenorrhoea has originated more from imperfect views in relation to the function of menstruation, than from the supposed inadequacy of our

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medicines to meet the indication. It is said, that in almost every instance of Amenorrhoea of some standing, a membrane is formed which lines the cavity of the uterus and is analogous to that formed in pregnancy called the decidua. The virgin uterus is equally liable to the formation of this membrane. Hence it appears that the stoppage of the menses results from the employment of the uterine vessels, first in the formation of this membrane, and secondly in its nourishment and growth.

The precise formation of this membrane has not as yet been fully developed, but as to its being generated, and that too by the vessels from whence the menstrual fluid is derived there seems to be no doubt. It is also stated, that this membrane has been often seen brought away in such cases. The expulsion of this membrane then, by which the vessels are restored to their primative action is necessary to effect a cure. It also appears evident from the preceding facts, that to effect this purpose, a medicine is required which exerts not only a powerful but specific action on the uterus, thereby stimulating it and imparting to it the power of throwing off this barrier if it

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exists, or else removing that peculiar morbid condition of the vessels. With a proper regard to the state of the system, the Polygala Seneka I believe will answer every demand.

I deem it quite useless to enter upon the natural history and botanical affinities of this medicine, as it is a well known article and found in every apothecary's shop. The Seneka is a powerful and highly diffusible stimulus; its action is propagated throughout the whole system rapidly and forcibly, and seems in the disease to which I am here to apply it to revive the drooping spirits of the oppressed sufferer and appears to inspire her with the pleasing hope of a speedy recovery. Here, you may think me too enthusiastic on the virtues of the Seneka, but such effects have been too obvious to have escaped notice, and too interesting to have been omitted. These pleasing forerunners to a perfect recovery I shall endeavour to point out more clearly and satisfactorily when I speak of the several cases in which they were made manifest.

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greater. As far back as I can trace its origin in the treatment of this disease, it seems that we are indebted for the discovery to Doct: Hartshorn of this City some years since; since which time, its virtues have been fully attested by the well directed experiments of the Professor of the Institutes and practice of medicine in this University –

I will now endeavour to illustrate its preeminence, by introducing my own experience in several cases during the latter part of last summer. In the early part of last spring a negro woman about thirty three years of age was afflicted with dropsy of the abdomen. Here our attention was first directed to this disease, which I am happy to state was effectually cured; but a suppression of the menses was now to contend with, and which had continued during the whole course of treatment for the dropsy. Though the dropsy was cured the general health did not advance, she was weak, rested badly at night, had shortness of breath, weak pulse, but occasionally a slight fever, gloomy countenance and a most astonishing depression of spirits.

Being now informed of her situation, I did not hesitate to attribute her tardy recovery and the existing symptoms to the

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Immediate recourse was now had to those medicines which were likely to prove successful, paying at the same time the greatest attention to the general constitution which called for tonics. It will be quite needless here, to mention what remedies were used previous to resorting to the Seneka, and on my suggesting this to my preceptor, it was readily agreed to make trial of its virtues. You are already aware that I approached the Seneka in the full belief of its adequacy. It was prepared after the following formula.

℞: Rad: Senekæ (bruised) ℥j

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simmer over the fire till it be reduced to ℥XIV; some aromatic as orange peel or cinnamon should be added to prevent its nauseating. Of this article I gave her ℥ijss daily for two weeks and then increased it to ℥ij in the twenty four hours, no effect arising to forbid its continuance or increased dose. Under this treatment the medicine very early began to manifest its efficacy upon the system, the patient becoming more cheerful, the difficulty of breathing greatly relieved, and she now began to delight in moderate exercise, as

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riding on horse back &c, which he did every day. Encouraged by this change, which it was impossible to attribute otherwise than to the Seneka, I prosecuted its administration. The patients health began now daily to increase, and with it my hopes of success. I would now and then omit its use for a week or ten days during the ordinary intervals of the discharge, and increase the dose about the time of its expected recurrence, but never gave more than ℥iss in the course of the day. The patient now felt herself so much relieved, tho. the menses had not yet appeared, that she requested the discontinuance of the medicine; I notwithstanding prosecuted its use, and ultimately my hopes were crowned with success in properly establishing the menstrual course, having used the seneka about three months. The first discharge was quite moderate and attended with some considerable degree of pain, but which was relieved by an Opiate. At the next periodical return the secretion was completely and happily performed, and now the patient was restored to the full enjoyment of health, to which she had been a stranger for about twelve months. This case alone would be sufficient to establish the great and preeminent virtues of this article, but

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as it has been my good fortune to witness the like effects in two other cases, one of which no less interesting, I will give them a place in this essay.

About the middle of the last summer I visited a negro girl nineteen years of age, who was labouring under this disease. Upon enquiring into the case, I was informed that early in the spring and about the time that the menses should have appeared, she took cold by being caught in a shower of rain, and the consequence was a suppression of the menses. The indisposition at the time was pretty considerable, and a bath: and some febrifuge medicine was administered by the family. The health of the patient I was informed was variable, being sometimes tolerable and at others much the reverse; but in a short time her situation was such as to demand serious attention.

The family physician, a gentleman of no slender information, had attended her all this while, but was unable to restore either her general health, even in the slightest degree, or to remove the disease in question. At the time that I saw her, she was much debilitated, had a smart fever, head ache, pain in the abdomen, and a distressing

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pain and distension in the ends of the fingers. I did not hesitate from the existing symptoms to bleed and purge; this relieved the pain in the fingers and removed the fever, and tonics were also given to improve the health, but my attention was directed more particularly to the uterus.

Many of the Emmenagogues had been employed by the attending physician to no effect, and I administered as many more with as little success, till I resorted to the Seneka. It was here given as in the preceding case, the patient taking every other night two grains of Aloes which kept her bowels in a fine condition. It was some time before any change took place, but by the particular attention paid to the Constitution, it ultimately removed the disease which was the only impediment to the restoration of health.

The third case is not so interesting as the former two. It occurred in a negro woman about thirty years of age who had never borne children, and who had always menstruated very irregularly and imperfectly. She caught cold a day or two before she should have menstruated which entirely suspended it. This was late in the fall and af-

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ter I had witnessed the success of the Senecka. I saw her about a fortnight after the suppression, and immediately gave the Senecka in pretty large doses, that I might bring on the discharge at the next period, which to my satisfaction was happily effected. I made particular enquiries of this woman relative to her situation, and she informed me that she had never menstruated before with so much ease, nor had she ever felt so well after it.

From these experiments with the Senecka, I cannot but believe, that it demands the greatest attention and is deserving to be placed at the head of the list of Emmenagogues. I have never seen this medicine used in the retention, but can readily suppose it to be well adapted to the more obstinate cases and should not hesitate to employ it.

If these brief remarks should be found of any service in contributing to corroborate that portion of evidence in favour of the Senecka, and thereby tend to the relief of one individual, the object of these pages will be fully accomplished.

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